

Symposium on

# Reducing Stigma and increasing mental wellbeing of Scheduled Tribe communities (SATHI)

3rd March, 2023

Eluru, Andhra Pradesh

The  
George  
Institute  
for Global Health



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Better care  
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The National Mental Health Programme envisages universal availability of mental health services across all districts of India catering to all communities including some hard-to-reach Scheduled Tribe communities. However, its execution across the country is limited and only a few districts have implemented it as planned; rural communities, difficult to reach Scheduled Tribe (ST) Areas and areas with difficult terrain are especially underserved (Mavlankar.D 2016). The ST population is a marginalized community and often live in relative social isolation with poorer health indices compared to similar non-tribal populations. In ST areas, often, individuals exposed to mental health stressors have low awareness about mental health symptoms and few options to seek care or discuss them, except support from faith healers which at times are detrimental (Subudhi C; 2020). Primary health workers are ill-trained to support mental health problems.

In West Godavari, Koyas are the predominant ST community followed by Kondareddis, and almost 50% of them have less than primary level education and majority are agricultural labourers. The George Institute from its previous research with this community in 2016 has realized that a more sustainable model to promote mental

health and wellbeing among the ST community would need involvement of the community and empowering the community to act as change agents to enhance mental health facilities for themselves.

Hence in our current project entitled Reducing Stigma and increasing mental wellbeing of Scheduled Tribe communities (SATHI), being run in 80 ST villages of Jangareddi Gudem Division, Eluru District, Andhra Pradesh.

In this context a policy symposium was conducted on 3rd of March 2023 to explore how SATHI can contribute to the District Mental Health Programme of the government of Andhra Pradesh and promote better mental health among the ST communities in Eluru district.

The symposium was attended by representatives from the government, researchers, village leaders/ elders, and civil society representatives.

The symposium started with a presentation by Dr Siddharth Devarapalli from The George Institute for Global Health, India outlining the purpose of the policy symposium and giving an introduction to the SATHI project. Dr. Devarapalli emphasized that SATHI project would focus on community inclusive to created a sustainable program.

### **The aim to focus on activities to bring about an improvement in four key mental health determinants:**

- i) A reduction of stigma associated with mental illnesses
- ii) Increasing the awareness of mental health illness, causes and symptoms among ST people with common mental disorders (CMDs) and their families
- iii) Exploring some societal determinants such as unemployment and gender-based differences that impact mental health and providing opportunities to the local community to reduce the impact of such factors on their lives, and
- iv) Build the capacity of the primary health care system to manage common mental disorders.

This was followed by panel discussion moderated by Dr. Devarapalli with the panelists Prof. Pallab Maulik, Dy Director and Director of Research, The George Institute for Global Health, India; Ms. Rebecca, Chairperson of the Women's Commission; Mr. Suresh representing the NGO Vikas, a partner in the SATHI project, Mr. Irayya, Village head, and Ganga Rathnam a person with lived experience who recovered as a result of the previous intervention entitled SMART mental health programme among Scheduled Tribes that the George Institute had conducted during 2014-15.



### Issues highlighted during the panel discussion:

#### Mental health awareness among the Scheduled Tribe communities

The level of awareness among the Scheduled tribes on mental health was perceived as being very low. Hence there is a need to spread awareness among the community. Given the situation project like SATHI could play an important role in establishing the linkages of mental health with issues like domestic violence and alcohol consumption Raising awareness on mental health could in turn have an impact on the reduction of domestic violence and alcohol abuse.

#### Stigma

As stigma plays an important role and acts as a barrier in promoting mental health It is important to focus on reducing stigma related to mental health by creating a culturally appropriate anti-stigma campaign that can be scaled up across Scheduled Tribe communities, creating a self-sustainable model.

#### Traditional Healers

- In Scheduled Tribe communities, traditional healers were sought out for mental health treatment at least once or twice before seeking treatment from the formal health care system. There is a strong belief among the Scheduled Tribes that evil spirits or witchcraft are the cause of mental health illness and therefore there is a hesitancy among these communities to access formal health care systems. Improving mental health care services
- With the scarcity of specialists and trained experts in mental health care services there is a need to train primary care doctors and non-physician health workers to provide mental health care services as close to the community as possible.

#### Reference:

Mavalankar D. Doctors for tribal areas: Issues and solutions. Indian J Community Med 2016;41:172-6.  
 Subudhi C. Healing Preferences among Tribal Patient with Mental Illness in India. J Neurosci Rural Pract. 2020 Apr; 11(2): 361–362.

## Public engagement

With the prevailing conditions of low level of awareness on mental health, and strong traditional belief that mental illness is the result of evil spirits, the mental ill are stigmatized. Hence public engagement and raising awareness is essential to address the stigma associated with mental health, and the SATHI can help contribute towards reducing stigma by promoting mental awareness and running an anti-stigma campaign. Thus SATHI will contribute towards strengthening the District Mental Health Programme by upskilling PHC doctors and non physician health workers (ASHAs).



## Employment opportunities

Mental illness results in the loss of livelihoods and lack of employment opportunities or loss of a job also acts as a stressor resulting in depression and other mental illnesses. Creating employment opportunities or running skill development courses can be promoted among the youth in tribal communities and their access to government schemes could be facilitated.

